

CONGAREE NATIONAL PARK



WESTON LAKE LOOP TRAIL GUIDE

This guide was produced by Friends of Congaree Swamp, which advocates for Congaree National Park and its unique environment. Special thanks go to John Galbary; Carolyn Hudson; John Cely; John Grego; Sharon Kelly; Art Cohen, University of South Carolina Department of Earth and Ocean Sciences; and the staff of Congaree National Park.

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Introduction

The Weston Lake Loop Trail starts from the Low Boardwalk and continues for 2.5 miles to the Elevated Boardwalk. The total round trip from the Harry Hampton Visitor Center is about 4.5 miles. Highlights include a one-mile passage along Cedar Creek, Weston Lake Slough (pronounced “slew”), and Weston Lake itself at the terminus of the trail.

On this trail, you will experience the old-growth characteristics that led advocates in the 1950s through the 1970s to preserve Congaree Swamp. What you will see is only a small portion of the 11,000 acres of old-growth forest in Congaree National Park, one of the tallest temperate forests in the world.

The forest’s age, constant state of succession, and the replenishment of its soil from Congaree River floods allows it to support an extraordinary diversity and density of wildlife. As a result, the park has been recognized as a Globally Important Bird Area, a Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance and an International Biosphere Reserve.

Wildlife sightings on your visit could include deer, raccoon, rat snakes and feral (wild) hogs. Look and listen for red-bellied woodpeckers, red-shouldered hawks and pileated woodpeckers year-round. Wood ducks may be seen on Cedar Creek, though the alarm call of the hens as they take flight is more commonly heard. During the summer, look for plentiful northern parula warblers and the beautiful prothonotary warbler.

Enjoy your visit to this national treasure!

Getting there

From the Visitor Center breezeway, the Boardwalk Loop Trail starts (see the park’s trail guide). Follow it south for .7 miles. Then, just past the bridge over a small slough, the Boardwalk Loop Trail turns left. Start the Weston Lake Loop Trail by continuing straight ahead (south) on a spur of the Boardwalk Loop.

Though the sites in this guide are numbered, you will find no related signage along the trail. Because much of the park is federally designated wilderness, signage (and other man-made impacts) must be kept to a minimum. Most of the numbered sites correspond to natural or man-made features, so their location should be clear. For some sites, the numbering

on the centerleaf map provides only approximate site location.

Site 1 (southwest corner of Boardwalk Loop)

In contrast to the lower and wetter habitats you travelled through to reach this point, you will be walking through drier bottomland hardwood forest for the rest of this hike. Pause here and study the understory vegetation and overstory trees. Congaree National Park has more than 75 species of native trees, a surprisingly diverse forest given its relatively modest size compared to other units in the park system. The park also contains more than 20 plant communities, but the dominant one includes a canopy of sweetgum, laurel oak and sugarberry trees. There is a large variety of trees in this dominant community.



Water hickory

Note the water hickory with scaly bark to the left of the trail, and look for the small, thin-skinned nuts on the ground.



Switchcane

The transition from lowland to upland is even more striking in the understory vegetation. Switchcane, a native bamboo-like grass that grows in wet woods, stretches in all directions. Cane provides critical nesting habitat for some characteristic bottomland bird species, including Swainson's warbler.

Native Americans managed canebrakes with controlled fires to encourage further growth, in part because canebrakes were excellent habitat for game. But canebrakes declined as early settlers used the cane for livestock forage and plowed it under for agriculture, particularly since the presence of cane was considered a sign of rich soil.

Site 2 (south end of Low Boardwalk)

Walk another 200 yards to the end of the boardwalk. Here the understory is no longer dominated by

switchcane, but by a mixture of grasses and sedges. A laurel oak stands to the left of the trail. To the right, look for standing dead trees, also called snags. Nature finds many ways to support new life from dead trees. A standing snag is colonized by cavity nesters, including birds such as the pileated woodpecker. Bats, raccoons, opossums, flying squirrels, snakes, lizards, and a host of bacteria and fungi also use these cavities as homes. And when the snags finally fall, bacteria, protists and fungi decompose them and turn them into nursery logs—places of fertile sustenance for new life to begin.

Still looking to the right, see if you can find dwarf palmetto in the distance. These shrub-like palms are closely related to the state tree, cabbage palm, but can be found well inland.



Snag

Dwarf palmetto is an example of a plant species that benefited from Hurricane Hugo. Hugo struck the park in the middle of the night, September 21–22, 1989, and damaged as many as half of the high

canopy trees. The resulting breaks in the canopy allowed dwarf palmetto to establish a foothold as a colonizing pioneer species.

Site 3 (middle of short boardwalk section)

Continue walking and you will soon arrive at another short section of boardwalk. Stop in the middle of this boardwalk section, but not too close to the American elm tree to your left. It's covered with poison ivy, growing up the tree as a vine with hairy stems. The vines often send out lateral stems, so that tree trunks can bristle with these vines. Be careful when crossing a fallen tree on the trail!



Poison ivy

Poison ivy is one of the many woody vine species or lianas (Spanish for vine) found at Congaree National Park. Lianas are often the first plants to colonize open areas after canopy trees are uprooted.

Poison ivy is increasing worldwide due to higher levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The plant's urushiol oils that cause the infamous skin reaction are also increasing in strength. While contact with any part of



Cypress knees

this plant any time of the year can cause severe dermatitis in humans, many different species of birds can be seen feasting on the ripe white berries.

Site 4 (Weston Gut bridge)

A bridge crosses Weston Gut, a

channel of slowly flowing water. A “gut” is a local term for a small, short floodplain stream that has clearly defined banks. Guts are distinguished from “creeks” by being shallower and shorter in length. They are often dry or stagnant during the summer and early fall. Guts seem to wind aimlessly over the floodplain, sometimes connecting different parts of the same creek together, or connecting one oxbow lake to another. Guts have an important role in floods. They transport water from the Congaree River throughout the floodplain in the initial stage of a flood, and then channel water so that it can flow more quickly back to the river and main creeks as the flooding subsides.

Pause in the middle of the bridge and note the trees in the middle and edges of the main channel of Weston Gut. The park has several species of trees uniquely adapted to the wettest habitats in the floodplain, but two of them, water tupelo and bald cypress, dominate the canopy. Most of the trees you see here are water tupelo, with large leaves and curved trunks. Bald cypress is one of the iconic trees of the Southern wetlands, with its characteristically straight trunk, feathery needles and numerous knees surrounding it.

At the far end of the bridge, note the large grapevines along the edge of the gut. The vines often grow with the tree and can live for decades. Several different wild grape species grow in the park, and their ripe fruit in late summer are a favorite food source for birds, raccoons and other wildlife.

A little farther on, you will also see supplejack vines with their characteristic smooth, black



Supplejack vine

bark. Supplejack (also called rattan vine) spirals symmetrically around tree trunks and each other. Small tree trunks entwined by supplejack vines have long been popular as a source material for walking sticks.

Site 5 (Cedar Creek)

After half a mile, Cedar Creek can be seen on your right. There are several gages and stations here, including a stream gaging station with a solar-powered satellite uplink, an inactive groundwater monitoring station, and an old well. The gage data is available through a link on the park's website and serves as a timely source of information on flooding conditions at the park.

Generally speaking, when the gage is at six feet, surface trails at the park are wet or under water. At eight feet, parts of the Low Boardwalk are submerged. At twelve feet, even parts of the Elevated Boardwalk are under water! Keep in mind that these observations are simple rules of thumb, the Visitor Center has more timely information posted at the Information Desk.

Site 6 (open field)

The trail immediately opens up to the site of the former Cedar Creek Hunt Club cabin, a raised structure that used to stand before you. It replaced an earlier structure built by the United States Hunt Club, so-named by the hunt club members to discourage poaching.

Open areas like this occur throughout the park, as former feed plots for game; old logging decks (sites for collecting and trimming trees



Swamp chestnut oak acorns

in timber operations); or former agricultural fields.

Through forest succession, the open areas progress to "old field" habitat, with fast-growing, sun-loving trees like sweetgum and loblolly pine competing with blackberries and grape vines for open space. This old field is rapidly changing to dense forest, and

will eventually be hard to recognize as a former clearing. Take advantage of the open sky to look for soaring birds, including Mississippi kites in summer or red-shouldered hawks year-round.

From here, follow the trail along the right-hand edge of the clearing. Stop at the swamp chestnut oak tree at the corner of the field and look on the ground for this species' unusually large acorns. The Weston Lake Loop Trail turns left along Cedar Creek, but you will travel across Cedar Creek bridge to visit Wise Lake.

Site 7 (Cedar Creek Bridge)

Pause in the middle of the bridge to observe Cedar Creek. Cedar Creek enters the park at Bannister Bridge and slowly winds across the floodplain for 13 miles before joining the Congaree River. Cedar Creek is the only Outstanding National Resource Water in the state, recognized for its exceptional natural and recreational value. Canoes and kayaks can be launched on the Cedar Creek Wilderness Trail at two different sites at the park: Bannister Bridge and South Cedar Creek.

Site 8 (Wise Lake Spur)

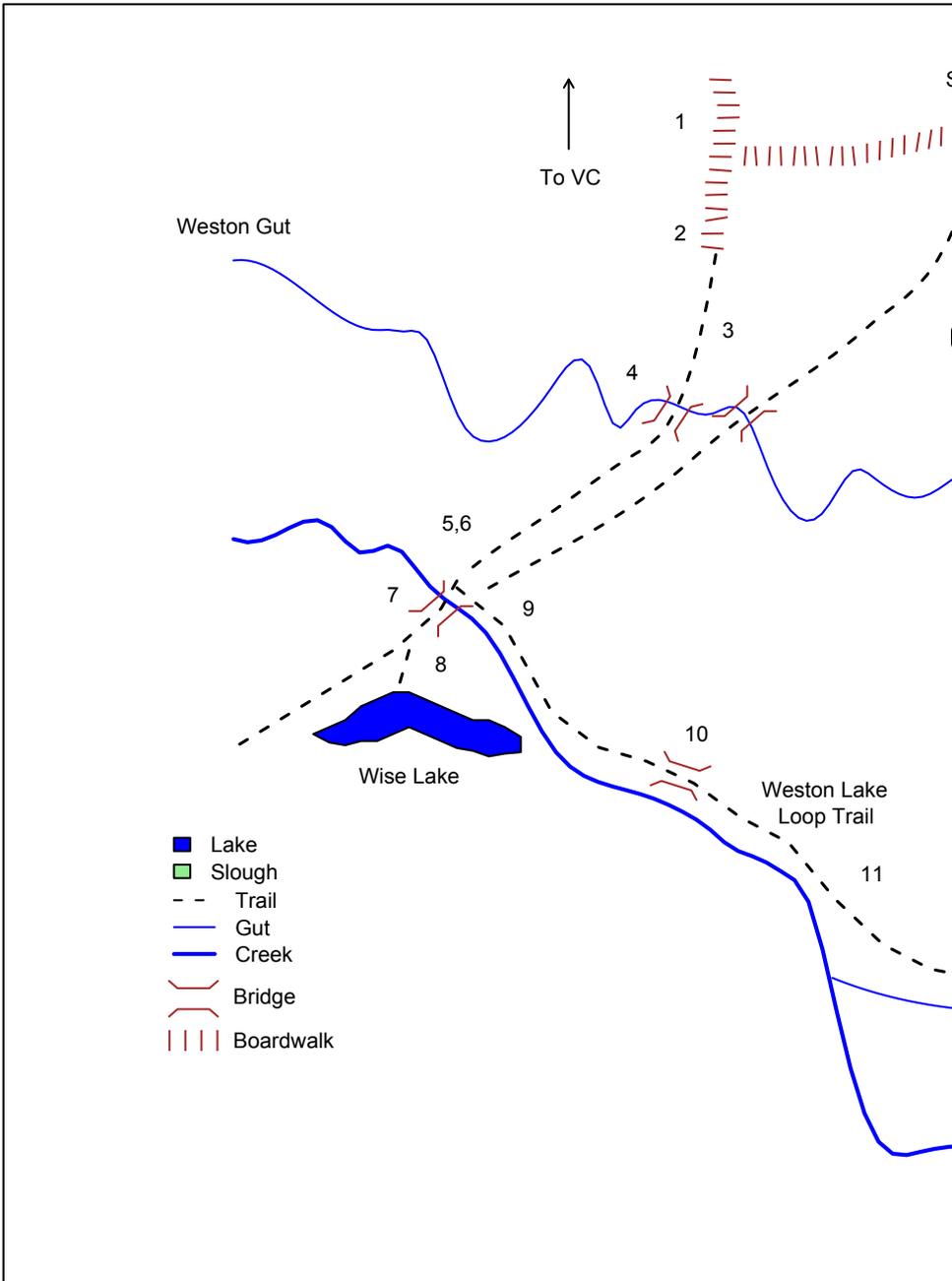
Beyond the bridge, you will find a sign marking the trailhead for Oakridge Trail and River Trail.

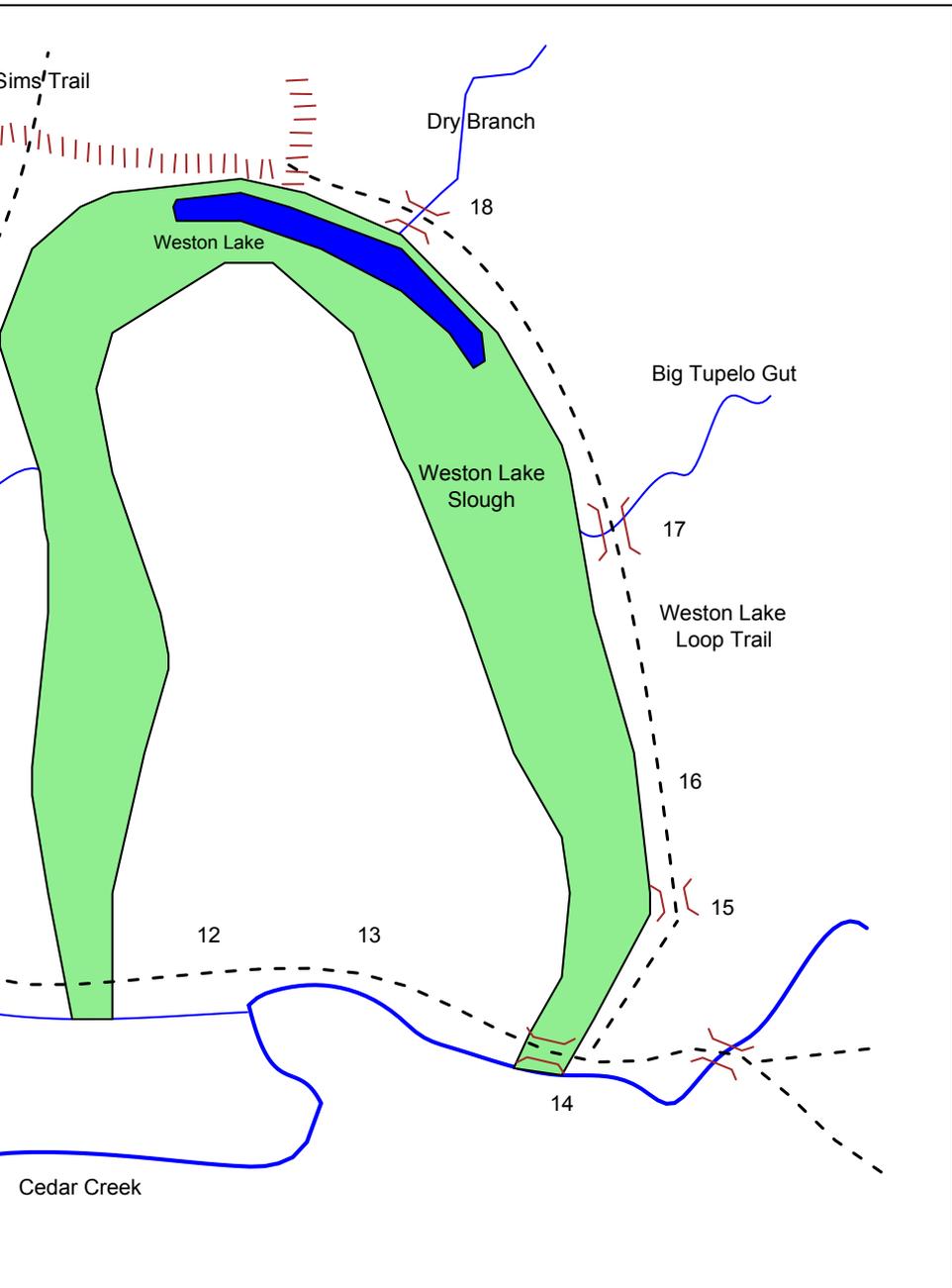
Note the two dominant mid-sized tree species here: American holly and pawpaw. You may have noticed holly at the start of the Low Boardwalk—it thrives in a variety of habitats at the park.



Pawpaw fruit

Pawpaw, with its large leaves, is one of the dominant understory trees in elevated areas of the park. Pawpaw fruit matures in late August and early September. The lobed green fruit speckled with black dots has edible creamy flesh inside encasing large, flat black seeds. The leaves turn a soft lemon yellow in the fall—a reliable source of fall color in the park.





Wise Lake, just beyond the trail sign, is an oxbow lake. More than a thousand years ago, it was a river meander of the Congaree. Over time, the river cut a new, shorter channel and the old meander was cut off. The Congaree River has continued to migrate to the south over the landscape and now lies about two miles away. Oxbow lakes eventually fill with sediment and become sloughs or ponds. A shallow oxbow like Wise Lake would typically be near the end of its lifecycle, but Wise Lake empties through a marshy outlet into Cedar Creek, and may be scoured of sediments when Cedar Creek floods, keeping it from filling in with silt.

Here you will see cypress knees like those you saw along the Low Boardwalk. An early theory that cypress knees help the trees breathe was disproved; the knees actually may be anchors or counterweights that allow a cypress tree to grow large and still remain upright in wet soil.

Site 9 (clearing end)

Retrace your steps across the Cedar Creek Bridge and turn right to continue on Weston Lake Loop Trail. This section of the trail follows the north bank of Cedar Creek for 1.2 miles.



Swamp chestnut oak leaf

As you re-enter the forest, you will see a substantial understory of pawpaw trees on your left. This portion of the trail introduces you to most of the dominant hardwood species found on the Congaree floodplain. A large swamp chestnut oak tree stands to the left. If you keep your eye out for the light scaly bark, chestnut-like leaves and large acorns, you will notice several other large swamp chestnut oak trees on the trail. A few mid-sized sugarberry stand nearby. Look for the smooth gray bark (similar to American beech) often obscured by warty growths.

Within the next 50 yards, you will find two examples of hardwood species to your right: a laurel oak and then a tall sweetgum. Laurel oaks are easy to spot in the winter; unlike other deciduous trees, they keep most of their

leaves throughout the year. Sweetgum can be recognized by their star-shaped leaves and spiny gumballs. The park has an uncountable number of large sweetgum, including the current national champion tree.

Site 10 (Boy Scouts bridge)

Our next destination is a small bridge marked “BSA Troop 199”. Just before reaching the bridge, look for several interesting features.

To your left, you may have already noticed shallow rectangular depressions at a diagonal to the trail. These features, which look too regular to be natural depressions, are borrow pits created when the trail was originally a jeep road for the hunt club.

On the right, look for a “walking” maple. A winged red maple seed landed on a tupelo or cypress stump years ago, and extended its roots over and through the old tree stump. The stump eventually rotted away, leaving only the maple trunk and its pedestal roots.

Past the bridge, you will find another dominant tree species—a large, leaning cherrybark oak.

En route to your next destination, the trail hugs the bank of Cedar Creek. You will eventually pass by a large loblolly pine at the edge of the creek. This pine is isolated, but you will see numerous



Cherrybark oak

large loblolly later on. Young loblollies are rarely seen in the park; whatever conditions existed in the park many decades ago to promote the growth of loblolly seedlings no longer pertain.

Site 11 (trail joins slough edge)

After following the bank of Cedar Creek, the trail continues straight along a former channel of Cedar Creek while the creek itself briefly jogs to the south.

Site 12 (trail returns to edge of Cedar Creek)

Cedar Creek soon turns north to rejoin the trail. This is an attractive spot to step off the trail and study Cedar Creek at its junction with the trail and the slough. Note the heavy damage to the base of several of the large trees nearby, almost exclusively sweetgum. Beavers have peeled away the bark to eat the sweet inner cambium layer. Removing the bark for this modest snack can “girdle” trees and kill them. This type of beaver activity is prevalent along the trail. If damage is fresh, you may note a pungent floral scent given off by the sweetgum sap. If the beaver population continues to increase, very few large sweetgum will be found along major water courses in the park. Beaver is a native species though, and beaver ponds benefit a host of species in this bottomland ecosystem.

Site 13 (small bridge)

The trail crosses a small bridge. Beyond the bridge to the left, you will see a sycamore with its patterned bone-white bark, large leaves, and round seed capsules that burst into feathery seeds. Sycamores are common along the elevated ground found along river channels.

Their presence in the floodplain interior can indicate a former river course. This can be a good spot to look for an iridescent green beetle on the trail. The six-spotted tiger beetle is named for the six inconspicuous white spots on the edge of its wing-cases.



Six-spotted tiger beetle

Site 14 (Weston Lake Slough)

After 1.7 miles, the trail crosses Weston Lake Slough over a substantial bridge. A slough refers here to a large elongated or curved depression in the floodplain that is wet most of the year. Sloughs are often former oxbow lakes that have become filled-in over time by sediments brought in when the river floods.

They are often filled with wetland trees, such as tupelo and cypress, but may also harbor aquatic marsh plants, such as sedges, a family of grass-like native plants.

Sedge is often an “emergent” vegetation, growing above the surface of shallow or seasonal wetlands.

Sedge species are difficult to distinguish, though a couple varieties in the park have characteristic seedheads that can aid identification.



Beaver dam

You may see beaver activity

here as well. Beavers have dammed Weston Lake Slough both upstream and downstream from the bridge, though the upstream dam is more conspicuous. Beavers often take advantage of bald cypress and water tupelo as anchors for their dams.

Look upstream for a large bald cypress with a damaged top at the mouth of Weston Lake Slough as it enters Cedar Creek. The tree is typical of many cypress that were too damaged to be cut down at the turn of the century by timber companies.

Beyond the bridge, pause at the trail sign marking the junction of Kingsnake Trail, Oakridge Trail and Weston Lake Loop Trail. The trail now

turns left, leaving Cedar Creek and following the edge of Weston Lake Slough through a healthy stand of switchcane to Weston Lake. Shortly past the turn, pause to admire the massive cherrybark oak to the right of the trail.

Site 15 (first bridge beyond Oakridge Trail junction)

Stop at the next bridge to study Weston Lake Slough to your left. An electro-fishing study conducted by South Carolina Department of Natural Resources from 1999–2002 found Weston Lake Slough to be an important nursery for juvenile fish. When the Congaree River overflows its banks, adult fish spread across the floodplain to breed. As floodwaters recede, sloughs become isolated from main river and creek channels and juvenile fish, amphibians, crayfish and other aquatic species can thrive in the absence of larger predators.

Site 16 (beyond first bridge and gut crossing)

Continuing past the bridge, look for the downed water oak along the very edge of Weston Lake slough on your left. Despite its name, it is not a common tree on the floodplain, and is more often found in an upland environment. Note the “tip-up,” the common name for the shallow root system of an upturned tree (other common names are “tombstone” and “harricane”). Most of the large trees have shallow roots because of the high groundwater table; the roots cannot survive in continually saturated soil. Tip-ups eventually erode and rot, forming a “pit and mound complex” that can persist for years after the tree itself has decayed into the soil.

With the return to higher ground, large loblolly pines become more frequent. This part of the floodplain was actually part of a 19th Century plantation, Pine Bluff, owned by the Weston family. The presence of mature pines here may be a legacy of attempts to cultivate this part of the floodplain in the 1800s.

Site 17 (Big Tupelo Gut)

At 2.1 miles, you cross a large bridge (Bridge D) over Big Tupelo Gut. A hundred yards from the bridge, the national champion loblolly pine grows on the bank of the gut. At almost 170 feet tall, it is the tallest tree in South Carolina. Though obscured by foliage in the summer, it is easily visible in the winter. A companion tree, almost as large, may block your view, but



Loblolly pine

look for the pine with the large horizontal limb branching to the right—that's the champion. At the end of the bridge, a footpath leads to the pine. This is not an official park trail, but a “social trail” created by frequent use (like fishermens’ trails).

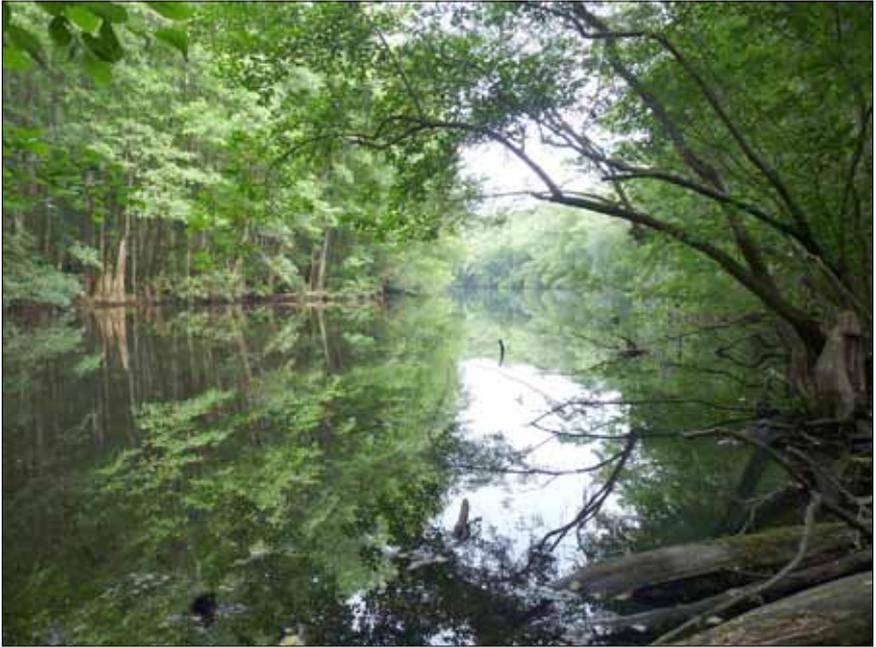
Shortly beyond the bridge, look for the dark, smooth, symmetrically spiraling vines to your right. You saw supplejack, or rattan vine, earlier in your hike. These vines have regularly spaced holes ringing their trunks—these are sap wells chiseled by yellow-bellied sapsuckers, a woodpecker species that winters at the park. Besides collecting sap, the wells also trap bugs, providing more than one type of food for sapsuckers and other birds and animals.

Site 18 (Dry Branch)

Stop at the bridge over Dry Branch. Usually this is a relatively clear-running stream quite different from the sloughs and guts you have been crossing, but trees have recently blocked its route. In spite of its name, Dry Branch runs year round and empties into Weston Lake.

Shortly beyond Dry Branch, the Weston Lake Loop Trail runs under the

high portion of the Boardwalk Loop Trail. When you rejoin the trail, you can either turn sharply right to the Weston Lake overlook and the Elevated Boardwalk (1.4 miles to Visitor Center), or return more directly to the Visitor Center by turning left on the Low Boardwalk (1.2 miles to Visitor Center).



Weston Lake



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